DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 277 CG 015 891

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TITLE Adult Children's Attachment and Helping Behavior to Elderly Parents: A Path Model.
SPONS AGENCY NRTA-AARP Andrus Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 12 Nov 81
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Scientific Gerontological Society (34th) and the Scientific & Educational Canadian Association on Gerontology (10th), (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 8-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Affective Behavior; *Attachment Behavior; Attribution Theory; Conflict; Dependents; *Family Relationship; *Helping Relationship; Influences; *Older Adults; *Parent Child Relationship; *Predictor Variables

ABSTRACT

Since adult children are both an essential and a limited support system for elderly parents, it is important to understand the factors which elicit and sustain their helping behavior. A causal path model based on the attachment and equity theories was constructed in which adult children's feelings of attachment to their parents lead to their attachment and helping behaviors. The model was tested with data from interviews with 148 adult children who had living elderly mothers. The eight variables considered in the model and measured in the sample included: (1) feelings of attachment; (2) attachment behaviors; (3) filial obligation; (4) interpersonal conflict; (5) mother's dependency; (6) negative feelings; (7) present helping behaviors; and (8) future help. Results indicated that present helping behaviors, attachment behaviors, and feelings of attachment had the strongest influence on commitment to provide future help. Filial obligation had an indirect influence mediated by attachment behaviors. The results suggest that appeals to a sense of obligation in a direct attempt to stimulate adult children to help elderly parents may not be fruitful. (Author/NRB)

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society, Toronto, Canada, November 12, 1981.

Supported by the Andrus Foundation of the National Retired Teachers Association and the American Association of Retired Persons.

CG 015891

ADULT CHILDREN'S ATTACHMENT AND HELPING BEHAVIOR TO ELDERLY PARENTS: A PATH MODEL[1,2]

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Although many elderly people are able to care for their own needs until late in life, needing little or no help from their adult children or from other support systems, most eventually go through a period of decline when they become increasingly dependent on help from others. The family, particularly the adult children, has traditionally assumed this role. There is ample evidence that adult children are continuing to provide help to their parents (Shanas, 1979, 1980; Sussman, 1965). At the same time, there has been a growth for many years in programs for the elderly in both government and the voluntary sector. These programs have acted to increase the independence of the elderly and decrease the burden on their adult children.

However, recent economic conditions have forced curtailment of some programs for the elderly and are threatening others. At the same time, there are many trends in modern society which act to limit the extent to which adult children can or are willing to provide help to their elderly parents (Treas, 1977; Ward, 1978). Since the adult children are both an essential and a limited support system for elderly parents, it is most important to understand the factors which elicit and sustain their helping behavior.

Sussman (1965) found that the extensiveness of help to elderly parents and the length of time it is offered depend on the extent of the mutual aid and socialization patterns already in existence prior to an illness

or crisis. Somewhat in the same vein, Bengtson, Olander, and Haddad (1976) proposed a model of intergenerational solidarity in which helping behavior was seen as an aspect of intergenerational solidarity. Helping behavior itself was seen as a function of the dependency needs of the elderly, residential propinquity, filial responsibility, and sex linkage. According to such a model, there would be more helping behavior when the parent's dependency needs became greater, when the adult child felt a greater sense of filial responsibility, when the adult child lived closer, and when the adult child was a daughter. Much current thinking in the field derives from this or similar sociological tradition.

The psychological tradition, in contrast, may be of greater value in explaining the long-lasting dyadic bond between parent and child and the motivations toward helping behavior which stem from that bond. The theory of attachment, although originating in the study of the infant-mother relationship, has much to offer when applied to the relationship later in life.

Attachment refers to an emotional or affectional bond between two people; it is essentially being identified with, in love with, and having the desire to be with another person. As such, it represents an internal state within the individual, which can be inferred from a stable propensity over time to seek proximity and contact with the attach figure, even though actual proximity-seeking behaviors may appear only occasionally or even be absent for extended periods (Ainsworth, 1972). In infancy, the child alternates periods of exploratory behavior with periods of seeking proximity to the mother and restoring contact and communication. Finally, protective behavior develops in which the child desires to protect the attached figure;

it is distinct from attachment behavior and complementary to it in that it is concerned with preserving or restoring the threatened existence of the attached figure rather than merely maintaining or restoring proximity (Bowlby, 1979, 1980).

According to Bowlby, attachment to a parent does not end in childhood or early adolescence but endures throughout the life span along with the related attachment, exploratory, and protective behavioral systems. In adulthood, attachment behaviors are usually responses to periods of separation, as the adult child communicates or visits periodically. Exploratory behavior is manifest in mobility or migratory behavior, while protective behavior is exemplified in the adult children's caregiving behaviors to their elderly parents. When the attachment bond is threatened by the parents' illness or deprivation, the adult child who is attached will provide caregiving to maintain the survival of the elderly parents and preserve the concomitant emotional bond.

Although the concept of attachment behavior roughly corresponds to the concept of associational solidarity as used by sociologists, the concept of attachment is more appropriate for a dyadic relationship on a psychological level whereas the concept of solidarity has more application for multiple relationships in a group at the sociological level. Second, in the psychological conceptual scheme, attachment as a bond is distinguished from attachment behaviors and from protective or helping behaviors, rather than all of these being attributes of the concept of solidarity. This allows these variables to be ordered meaningfully in terms of antecedent-consequent conditions, with the attachment bond (as an internal psychological state) temporally preceding attachment behaviors and protective behaviors. Further

attachment behaviors can also be viewed as preceding protective (or helping) behaviors for some contact and communication must take place before the need for help can be ascertained and the actual helping can occur.

The question of whether affection for the elderly parent leads to more frequent interaction is a question which has been considered by various researchers, with somewhat differing findings. Cicirelli (1979; 1980) found a positive but relatively weak correlation between feelings of closeness and frequency of interaction. Adams (1968) found a similar positive relationship when moderate distances between child and parent were involved (thus making the contact volitional in nature), but not when distances were very close (accidental and/or obligatory contacts) or very great (thus making interaction difficult or impossible). Rosow (1967) found that parent dependency rather than feelings of closeness determined the frequency of interaction of adult children with elderly parents, and concluded that high interaction was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for emotional closeness. One can reverse the direction of this reasoning and suggest that emotional closeness is not the only factor leading to interaction, and that feelings of obligation as well as parent dependency may also lead to interaction with the parent (Weishaus, 1979). Concepts of filial obligation have been advanced by many, such as "irredeemable obligation" (Blau, 1973), family loyalty (Adams, 1968), and filial maturity (Blenkner, 1965), and are held to be responsible for much helping behavior.

Equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) is another theoretical perspective on human relationships that may well be applied to the topic of adult children's helping behavior to elderly parents. An equitable relationship

between two people exists when an individual perceives that both participants in the relationship are receiving equal relative gains from the relationship after examining the inputs of each and the outputs in terms of costs and benefits. When one's benefits or rewards from the relationship in relation to their costs become less than what the other party is perceived as gaining, the individual becomes discontented and seeks to restore equity to the relationship. This can be accomplished by decreasing input, demanding more from the other person, abandoning the relationship, and so on. It becomes a difficult matter to determine whether equity exists in a relationship, since both tangible and intangible costs and benefits are involved.

In applying notions of equity to the helping relationship, one can note first that considerable evidence exists that the balance of mutual aid between generations shifts as parents become older and more dependent, with more aid flowing from children to parents than vice versa (e.g., Aldous & Hill, 1965; Blau, 1973). Thus, as parents become more dependent, the balance of tangible mutual aid is no longer equitable. Other things being equal, one would expect the relationship to be altered in some way as parental dependency increases. Adams' (1968) finding that the adult relationship with the mother suffered when that mother was widowed provides some support for this idea.

Another cost of helping the parent that may become great for adult children is the stress of helping on the adult child. That is, providing help to a dependent parent has negative consequences for those providing the care (Rosenmayr, 1977; Robinson, & Thurnher, 1976; Simos, 1973: Horowitz, 1978), with the psychological strain often being the most important. Such negative consequences may lead to the reduction of further helping behavior.

There may also be interpersonal conflicts between adult children and their parents which are of long standing and which add to the costs of a helping relationship. Simos (1973) found that most adult children perceived their interpersonal conflicts with parents as rooted in the past. Where there has been a history of rejection, alienation, argument, or other conflicts, there may be little willingness to help the elderly parents. Even appeals to duty may induce little help. An opposing viewpoint holds that positive and negative feelings can co-exist in the same relationship (Troll & Smith, 1976; Troll, Miller, & Atchley, 1979); if this is true, then interpersonal conflict would not necessarily lessen helping behavior.

The objective of the present study was to construct a causal path model based on the attachment and equity theories, to test the model with data on adult children's helping relationships to their elderly parents, and to examine its implications for understanding helping behavior.

Method

Hypothetical causal model. As a first step, a hypothetical causal model was constructed on the basis of existing theory (Blalock, 1968; Asher, 1976). As noted earlier, attachment theory provides a clear temporal ordering of variables, with feelings of attachment leading to attachment behaviors, and in turn to helping (protective) behaviors. The model makes no attempt to test equity theory. However, perception of parental dependency, and interpersonal conflict with the parent would both be regarded as inputs to any judgment of equity and thus causally prior to both the attachment behaviors and helping behaviors. The stress which arises as a consequence of helping (represented here by the negative feelings engendered by helping behaviors) would follow logically from helping behaviors. One

further variable which does not derive from either attachment theory or equity theory but which has a prominent place in existing research on helping behavior is filial obligation; this variable is clearly causally antecedent to attachment behaviors and helping behaviors. Finally, two separate aspects of helping behavior are considered in the model, present helping behavior and commitment to provide future help. Commitment to provide future help was included in the model for two reasons. First, it was felt that negative consequences of present helping behavior would have an effect on future help. Second, since many of the elderly parents of adult children in the study had low needs for help, it was felt that commitment to provide future help in a situation when parents' needs were greater might provide a better test of the effects of variables causally antecedent in the model. The full recursive model involving these variables is depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Sample. The model was tested on a sample of 148 adult children with living elderly mothers who were part of a larger study (Cicirelli, 1980). All adult children resided in Lafayette, Indiana, a city of about 60,000 people consisting largely of whites from the lower and middle classes. Subjects were located through canvassing of randomly selected blocks of the city to identify adults with living parents over age 60, or elderly persons over age 60 with adult children residing in the city. Approximately half were males and half were females.

Procedure. Data were gathered through an interview-questionnaire administered in the subject's home. Some 57% of all adults eligible for the study who were contacted agreed to be interviewed.

The interview-questionnaire was structured in format and required approximately 90 minutes to administer. It is described in detail elsewhere (Cicirelli, 1980). Interviewers were two male and two female graduate students in Psychology.

Measures. Eight variables were considered in the model, and measures of each of these variables were obtained from the interview-questionnaire. They will be described in turn.

Feelings of attachment. Since attachment to the parent is an internal state, its existence and strength were inferred from items on the questionnaire dealing with the adult child's feelings for the parent. A factor score was constructed which represented four areas: adult child's feelings of closeness to the parent, adult child's feelings of compatibility to the parent, adult children's values agreement with the parent, and adult children's judgment of the parent's traits. (It is held that a child who is attached to the parent will feel closer and more compatible with the parent, and will have greater identification to the parent and therefore higher values agreement and more positive trait judgments.) Factor scores were expressed as standard scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of approximately 10.

Attachment behaviors. Three questionnaire items assessed the adult child's attachment behaviors: proximity ot the parent, frequency of visiting, and frequency of telephoning. Other things being equal, the adult child who is more attached will also live closer, and visit and telephone the

parent more frequently. Each item was measured on a nine-point scale, and the three items were summed to yield the measure of attachment behavior. (Correlations between the three items ranged from .60 to .90.) Scores could range from 3 to 27, with high scores representing stronger attachment behaviors.

Filial obligation. An adaptation of the Filial Expectancy Scale (Seelbach & Sauer, 1977) was used to provide a measure of the obligation which adult children felt toward their elderly parents. (An item dealing with financial support to parents was deleted from the scale, since relatively few children now provide financial support to their parents in view of Social Security and other programs.) Each of the five remaining items on the scale was rated by subjects on a five-point scale to indicate the extent of their agreement with the item. The total Filial Obligation score was obtained by summing the five item scores. Scores ranged from 5-25, with a high score indicating greater filial responsibility. Internal consistency reliability for the scale (Cronbach's alpha) was .73, computed for the subjects of the study.

Interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflict with the parent was assessed by three items on the interview-questionnaire: reported degree of conflict in the relationship, the number of content areas in which conflict occurs (conflict would occur over more areas in a more conflictful relationship), and the degree of conflict anticipated if the parent lived with the child. Each was measured on a five-point scale and the three items summed to yield a total score for interpersonal conflict. Scores ranged from 3 to 15, with a high score representing greater conflict. Internal consistency reliability was .71.

Mother's dependency. Mother's dependency on the adult child was measured by the adult child's global ratings of the extent to which the parent was dependent on that child and the extent to which the parent now needed "looking after." The two items were summed to yield the dependency measure.

Negative feelings. To measure the consequences of helping behavior which were stressful for the adult child, ten items were devised which dealt with the negative feelings experienced by the adult child in connection with helping or caring behavior toward the elderly person. By "negative feeling" is meant an unpleasant emotional state. The negative feelings represented were based on anecdotal reports of adult children's feeling in the literature, and included such feelings as impatient, frustrated, helpless, irritated, and so on. The subject indicated the degree to which each feeling was experienced on a five-point scale. The ten items were summed to yield the total Negative Feelings score, with possible scores ranging from 10 to 50. Internal consistency reliability was .85.

Present helping behaviors. The adult child was asked to indicate the amount of help presently given the parent on a five-point scale ranging from "none" to "all or almost all" for each of sixteen service areas: homemaking, housing, income, home maintenance, personal care, home health care, transportation, psychological support, social and recreation activities, employment, bureaucratic mediator, reading materials, career education (job training), enrichment education, and protective services. A principal component factor analysis of the sixteen item scores indicated the presence of a single general factor; therefore the item scores were summed to yield a total score which could range from 16 to 80.

Future help. Similarly to the measure of present helping behaviors, the commitment to provide future help was assessed by asking the adult children how much help they could give if their parents were to need a great deal of help in the future. Each of the sixteen service areas listed above was again rated on a five-point scale. Only a single factor was indicated; therefore the item scores were summed to yield a total score which could range from 16 to 80.

Analysis. The intercorrelations of each of the eight measures and their means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine partial regression coefficients for predictors at each link of the hypothesized path model. Only those linkages with partial regression coefficients significant at the .05 level were retained in the model. Also, any path coefficient smaller than .10 was regarded as negligible and that linkage deleted. Regression coefficients for the reduced model are presented.

The limitations of the method are recognized. First, the measures of the variables of interest are fallible measures, which implies a certain instability of the path coefficients. Second, the model does not attempt to present an exhaustive analysis of all variables which determine helping behavior but only those of interest. Also, various background variables have not been included in the model. Finally, it is assumed that the assumptions of the method have been met to a reasonable degree. In spite of limitations, it is felt that the analysis will bring out some of the important implications of the hypothetical model in its application to actual helping relationships.

Results

The path diagram depicting the path model resulting from the analysis is presented in Figure 2. The path coefficients shown are standardized partial regression coefficients.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The model can also be described by sets of structural equations in which unstandardized partial regression coefficients are used. The squared multiple correlation coefficient is also presented with each equation.

The equation for attachment behaviors is as follows:

Attachments behaviors = .083 Feelings of attachment +

.41 Dependency + .48 Obligation + 3.29 $R^2 = .17$

Thus, the adult child's attachment behaviors to the elderly mother are a function of feelings of attachment, the dependency of the mother, and filial obligation. This supports findings regarding these variables in the previous literature.

The equation for helping behavior is:

Helping behavior = .86 Attachment behaviors +

1.32 Dependency + 2.16 $R^2 = .46$

Here, helping behavior appears to be a direct function of only two variables, attachment behaviors and dependency. Interpersonal conflict with the mother has no effect on helping behaviors, and feelings of attachment and filial obligation have only an indirect effect, acting through their effect on attachment behaviors. Where the mother is perceived as dependent and where a pattern of attachment behaviors exists (proximity, visiting, and telephoning), the adult child will exhibit more helping behaviors. Feelings

of attachment and obligation seem to be important only insofar as they stimulate and sustain the attachment behaviors. This finding is in agreement with Sussman's (1965) conclusion that help to elderly parents depends on the extent of socialization patterns already in existence prior to an illness or crisis.

The equation for the commitment for future help is as follows:

Future help = .45 Helping behaviors + .21 Feelings of attachment
+ .77 Attachment behavior - .50 Conflict
- .76 Dependency + 17.18 $R^2 = .46$

Commitment to provide future help, then, is a function of the amount of present helping behaviors exhibited by the adult child as well as attachment behaviors, feelings of attachment, conflict, and parent dependency. There is a greater commitment to provide future help the more help is given at the present time, the more attachment behaviors are displayed, the stronger the feelings of attachment, the less interpersonal conflict with the mother, and the less the present perceived dependency of the mother. The child's filial obligation had no direct effect on commitment to provide future help, although it did have an indirect effect through its effect on attachment behaviors. The hypothesized link of negative feelings resulting from helping behaviors on commitment to future help was not borned out by the data. It should be noted also that feelings of attachment, attachment behaviors, and dependency had indirect as well as direct effects on future help. (Paradoxically, the indirect effects of dependency act to increase future help while the direct effect appears to decrease it.)

The equation for negative feelings is as follows:

Negative feelings = .18 Helping behaviors + .66 Dependency +

.51 Conflict - .16 Feelings of attachment -

.28 attachment behaviors + 19.28 $R^2 = .27$

Negative feelings are greater the more helping behaviors there are, the more dependent the parent is perceived as being, and the greater the extent of interpersonal conflict with the parent, while feelings of attachment and attachment behaviors act to lessen negative feelings.

The decomposition of the bivariate correlations in the path model is shown in Table 2. Given the causal ordering proposed by the model, the influence of attachment behaviors on future help to elderly mothers is more than twice as great as that of present helping behaviors. The influence of attachment behaviors on future help is in part indirect, mediated by present helping behaviors.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The hypothesized causal ordering of the feelings of attachment, attachment behaviors, and helping behaviors in relation to future was given support by the data analysis. The central role of adult children's attachment behaviors, i.e., the extent to which they keep themselves in proximity and contact with their elderly parents, in relation to both present helping behavior and commitment to help in the future also supports the sociological positions of Bengtson et al (1976) on the importance of residential propinquity for help-giving and Sussman (1965) on the

importance of already existing socialization patterns. However, there are two points of difference with these sociological positions. First, feelings of attachment to the parent were found to have a significant influence on future help, both in a direct way and indirectly through its influence on attachment behaviors. The second point of difference was in the indirect influence of filial obligation on future help, acting through its effect on the mediating variable of attachment behaviors, in contrast to the direct role of filial responsibility in the sociological positions (Bengtson et al, 1976; Blau, 1973). The present study suggests that a sense of filial obligation and feelings of attachment act to increase the adult child's attachment behaviors in relation to the elderly parents. Helping behaviors then flow out of the established attachment behaviors.

Attachment behaviors in relation to the parent are also influenced by parental dependency (Rosow, 1967; Weishaus, 1979). Interpreted within the attachment model, one can speculate that adult children may increase their attachment behaviors toward the parent in later life at the first signs of decline due to aging. An increase in attachment behaviors at a point before elderly parents actually want or need help from others would place adult children in a position where they could monitor their parents' aging process, and be ready to assist where possible. This viewpoint implies that many adult children become concerned about their parents as the parents become older, increasing their interactions with the parents in order to detect when help may be needed.

Although the study did not set out to test equity theory, the findings indicate that perceived dependency, interpersonal conflict, and negative feelings resulting from present helping behavior have, at best, a minor

influence on adult children's commitment to help parents in the future. Indeed, present help was greater the more the perceived dependency of the mother. In relation to future help, a weak direct influence of dependency to lessen future commitment was offset by its indirect influence through present helping behaviors. However, most adult children in the study gave only a low to moderate level of help at the present time (Cicirelli, 1980). It may be, in terms of equity considerations, that positive gains from the relationship with the parents are sufficient to outweigh any negative aspects of help-giving, conflict, and dependency as long as the total amount of help required does not become excessive. The desire to preserve the relationship with the elderly parent for as long as possible through protective help-giving behaviors, as proposed by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979, 1980), is a motivation which appears to supersede any equity considerations.

The results also suggest that appeals to a sense of obligation in a direct attempt to stimulate adult children to help elderly parents may not be fruitful. It may be better to attempt to induce such attachment behaviors as visiting and telephoning as an indirect means of stimulating help to parents. Appeals to the adult child's sense of obligation to remain in contact with the parent as well as evokations of the warmth of feelings of attachment to the parent may be ways to stimulate a regular pattern of communication between adult child and elderly parent before a substantial dependency situation arises. Through regular communication, the adult child can become more aware of the parent's needs and respond to them within the structure of a relationship which can be valued for its own sake.

The results of the study apply directly to adult children of elderly parents in a small midwestern city. These people tend to be traditional and conservative in their attitudes and values. Other kinds of populations, such as those in a large metropolitan area, may value the relationship to elderly parents less and perceive the costs of helping them to be much greater. Further, it is not known what effect such trends as increasing divorce rates and decreasing family size will have on adult children's helping behaviors. Further studies are needed to explore these questions.

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Table 1

Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Variables

Variable	Intercorrelations								Mean	S.D.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
1. Future help	1.00	.51	-.13	.05	.29	-.27	.58	.36	45.85	11.85
2. Helping behaviors		1.00	.12	.42	.16	-.10	.59	.16	25.60	8.58
3. Negative feelings			1.00	.27	-.17	.33	-.14	-.34	16.79	7.01
4. Mother's dependency				1.00	-.01	.01	.16	-.02	5.72	2.19
5. Filial obligation					1.00	-.10	.35	.39	18.06	3.25
6. Conflict						1.00	-.09	-.37	6.59	3.40
7. Attachment behaviors							1.00	.25	18.42	5.33
8. Feelings of attachment								1.00	50.00	9.23

Note: Correlations larger than .16 significant at the .05 level.

Table 2

Decomposition of Bivariate Correlations in Path Model

Bivariate Correlation:	AB,MD	AB,FO	AB,FA	HB,MD	HB,AB	FH,MD	FH,C	FH,FA	FH,AB	FH,HB
Original Correlation	.16	.35	.25	.42	.59	.05	-.27	.36	.58	.51
Causal-direct	.17	.29	.14	.34	.53	-.14	-.14	.16	.35	.33
Causal-indirect	0	0	0	.09	0	.20	0	.07	.17	0
Total Causal	.17	.29	.14	.43	.53	.06	-.14	.23	.52	.33
Noncausal	-.01	.06	.11	-.01	.06	-.01	-.13	.13	.06	.18

Note: AB = attachment behaviors; MD = mother's dependency; FO = filial obligation; FA = feelings of attachment; HB = helping behaviors; FH = future help; C = conflict.

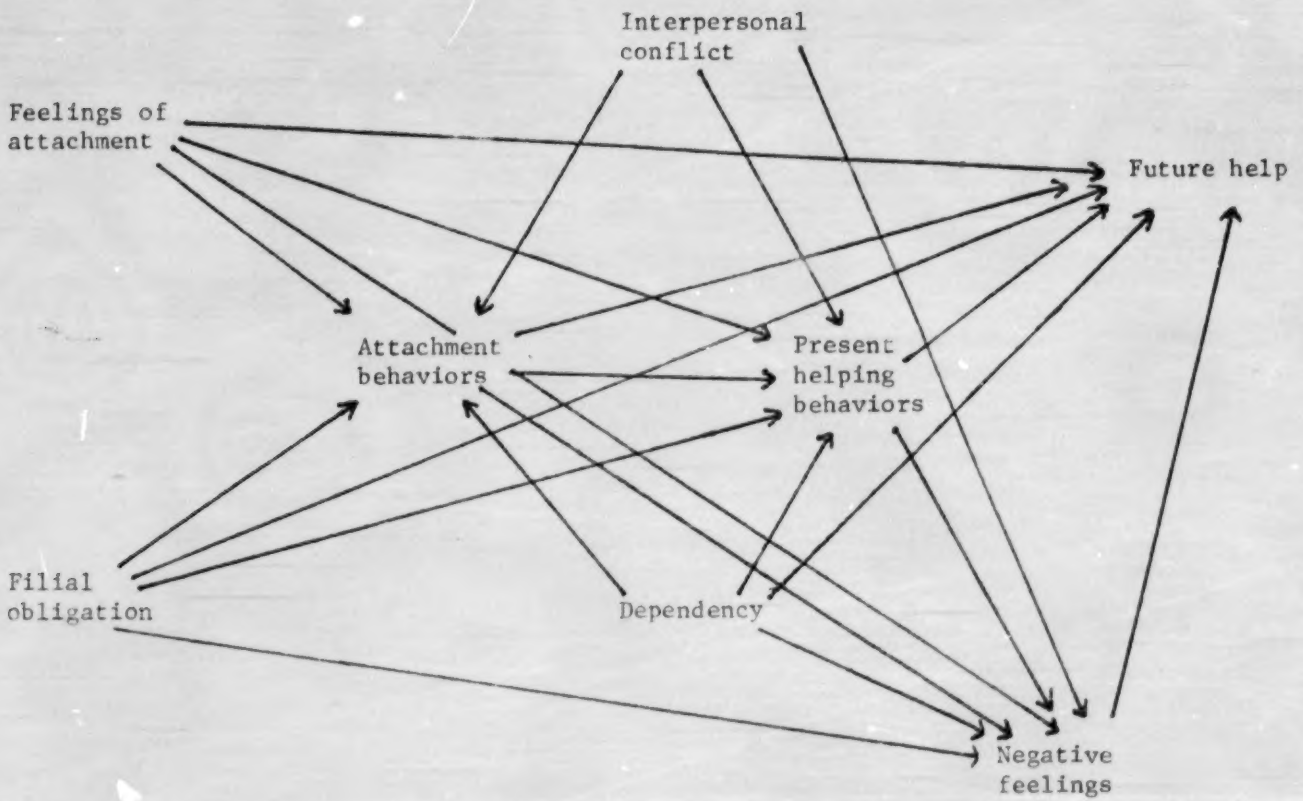

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of variables influencing adult children's present helping behaviors to parents and commitment to future help.

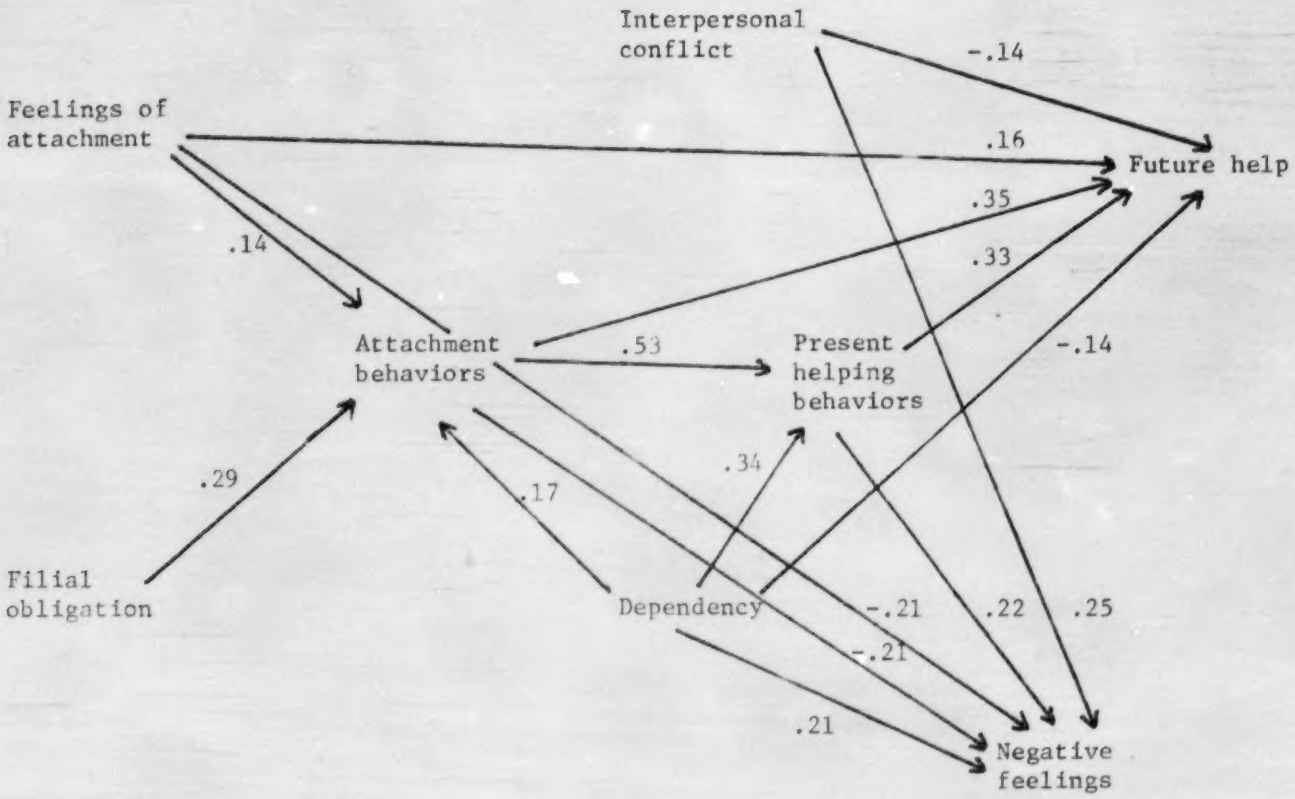

Figure 2. Path diagram of adult children's present helping behaviors and future help to elderly mothers. (Path coefficients are standardized partial regression coefficients.)

Footnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society, Toronto, Canada, November 12, 1981. Data on which this paper is based were drawn from a larger study supported by the Andrus Foundation of the National Retired Teachers Association and the American Association of Retired Persons.
2. The assistance of Ruth Chaffee, Tara Lavelle, Barbara Mosbacher, Jon Nussbaum, and Philip Sutton in the collection and coding of data is gratefully acknowledged.